

Commencement Address The Citadel Graduate College

May 9, 2009

**Dr. Jim Rex
State Superintendent of Education**

Thank you, General Rosa. Dean Hines, members of the Board of Visitors, distinguished guests, faculty and staff of The Citadel, family, friends, and, especially, the graduates....it is an honor to be with you today, at one of South Carolina's landmark institutions of higher learning, to celebrate this important milestone in the lives and careers of this year's graduates. Congratulations to all of you on this exceptional achievement. But to those of you who are planning to use your advanced degrees in the classroom -- and it would be just fine with me if that's every single one of you -- let me say a special thank you.

You are doing the most important job on the planet, and the most rewarding.

It's a special pleasure for me to be back along the corridors of higher education, where I spent a great deal of my professional life. Let me tell you, though, I had to think twice about accepting General Rosa's invitation. It's been a tough spring for commencement speakers, hasn't it?

Ben Stein, the comedian, was booted out as the University of Vermont's speaker. Students at the University of Virginia circulated a petition protesting their commencement speaker. And I'm sure you've read about the big stir at the University of Notre Dame over their invitation to President Obama. I'm pretty sure I'm not as controversial as any of those guys -- or at least you've been too polite to protest.

But commencement addresses are also tough because it's an important moment, and speakers are expected to come up with important advice that will spur you on to do great things. I heard a pretty good description of advice a few years ago, when a Chicago Tribune columnist called it "a form of nostalgia. Dispensing it is a way of fishing the past from the disposal, wiping it off, painting over the ugly parts, and recycling it for more than it's worth."

Of course, that never stopped anyone from giving it, and I'm going to give you mine today.

As some of you may know, I'm something of an anomaly in the world of politics. I ran for office for the first time in my life at an age when people with better sense were enjoying a comfortable retirement. I had no political

experience and no political ambition. But I saw serious challenges for the state I love, and I felt called to do this job.

Since my election in 2006, I've discovered the enormous advantage in serving my state without the burden of personal ambition. I am free to say and do exactly what I believe is right, without weighing the political consequences. I can act with urgency, without worrying about political risks. I can focus on building consensus and solving problems, without caring who gets the credit.

South Carolina faces tremendous obstacles in education -- the legacy of poverty, of racial division, of the lack of value historically placed on learning. I believe those problems can be solved if we have the will to take on the hard challenges and do the right thing. Today, we are moving

forward on issues like reforming funding, so that every school has the ability to deliver a high quality, modern education. On comprehensively changing our tax system, to eliminate the vast and appalling disparities between our most prosperous schools and the schools along our “Corridor of Shame.” We have been recognized nationally for programs that pay teachers based on how well they perform, to help keep our most effective teachers in the classroom. We are a national leader in single-gender education and other initiatives that expand choices for parents and students.

I was much more comfortable in retirement -- believe me -- than I am taking arrows as the only Democrat holding statewide office in South Carolina.

But I ran for office because I know I have been blessed...and I know I have a duty to give back.

Every one of you here today shares that same responsibility. You've worked hard to accomplish what you're celebrating today. But whether you entered graduate school straight from college, with your family's support, or earned your degree while holding down a full-time job and raising a family -- you have been blessed, as I was, with extraordinary opportunity. You have the gift of an excellent education. You have the gift of the values you were raised with -- faith in God, love of family, belief in community. You are also armed with the values this school is renowned for -- duty, morality, and leadership.

You have all the tools at your disposal to change the world for the better. There is, as Microsoft founder Bill Gates put it, "almost no limit to what the world has a right to expect" from you.

Here are some things I hope you'll do, starting now, with the tremendous opportunity you have.

I hope you'll value success, but I hope you'll define success in a different way.

For many in my generation, success has meant material comfort, climbing the corporate ladder, achieving professional prominence. Do all those things with your advanced education -- but not at the expense of serving your world, your country, your community, and your neighbor.

You don't have to run for State Superintendent of Education -- unless you just like taking arrows. But keep a sense of yourself as a moral being with a social mission in the world -- find the causes you believe in, and work on giving back. I'll say this from experience: Nothing in your

life will satisfy you more than giving something of value to the world...expecting nothing of material value in return.

I hope you'll also strive for unity.

Like all Americans, I am deeply concerned about the challenges our nation is facing. We are mired in economic recession. Hundreds of thousands of people -- many of them people we know, right here in South Carolina -- are losing their jobs and their homes. We are fighting a war on two fronts in the Middle East. And yet, here at home, we are consumed with petty political battles and partisan bickering.

I've often thought of the lessons there are for all of us in the actions of the passengers of United Flight 93, the flight that crashed into a field in Pennsylvania on September 11, 2001. The men and women aboard that flight were faced with horrific tragedy, on a scale that most

of us, God willing, will never even have to think of. Yet they put their fears aside, their differences aside, and they sacrificed to do what needed to be done, for their country's sake.

That, I believe, is the essence of the American spirit -- the commitment to our country, our sense of shared destiny, the inherent inclination we have to pull together in times of trouble.

These are troubled times, and all of us are on the plane together. It doesn't matter if you're the pilot or a passenger, if you're traveling in First Class or Coach, if you're in the California section or the South Carolina section -- if we go down, we're going down together. We can point fingers, grandstand, and play political games, as the worst among us seem to do. Or we can do what the

best of us always do -- we can set aside our differences and work together to find our course.

I hope you'll work to reach consensus -- to move past partisanship, past endless and useless political battles, and toward a time when we are pulling together as one to move our state and our nation forward.

And finally, I hope you'll value bold action, because none of us has any time to lose.

I don't know how many of you have seen the Internet videos of the Tsunami that devastated Southeast Asia five years ago. They are difficult to watch. But I noticed something in watching them that confirmed my thinking about the perils of incremental action.

As the Tsunami gathered, some of the people who were on the beach -- curious about what was happening -- walked toward the ocean, which was rapidly receding --

exactly the wrong thing to do. Others on the beach sensed the danger, and began walking slowly toward higher ground.

Some ran -- and they were the only ones who were saved.

Sometimes, doing the right thing slowly gives you the same result as doing the wrong thing altogether.

In our state and in our country, it seems to me, we too often do the right thing slowly. I see it in education every day. We take small steps that move us incrementally forward, but we lack the commitment to run -- when running is all that can save us.

Don't be satisfied with small progress. Use your talent, your energy, and your education to help us run instead of walk -- to move us forward at a leap, not a crawl.

John Updike, the famous author, once gave this advice to a group of graduates who were heading out to inherit the world: “Take it up reverently, for it is an old piece of clay, with millions of thumbprints on it.”

I hope you'll leave your thumbprints on our world, and I hope you'll do your part to make its shape more beautiful and more perfect.

Thank you for the opportunity to share this celebration, and good luck to you all.

